

SON OF A BUTLER

The Dramatic Incidents of a Strange Friendship.

BY ARCHIBALD MARSHALL

MY LORD and his guests were dining. Shining stars from wax candles in scones on carved, gilded, age-polished wood, and clusters of shaded lights on the long dinner table lit up the flowers and the glass and the silver, the faces of the women, the white fronts of the men, the animated faces, dark or fair.

At one end of the hall was a carved screen, and behind it a rough oak-paneled gallery. A panel of the screen had been ever so little withdrawn, and through the narrow space thus disclosed a little group of maid servants was watching the scene. In front of them a small boy looked down into the hall with fascinated, unintermittent gaze. He was the only child of the butler, Willie Page, the friendly maids called him.

It was on such occasions as this that, with powdered hair, silk stockings and fine breeches, in the gleam of publicity, the footmen put the crown to their service. And far above them, with brain to direct, unquestioned authority, experienced concentrated skill, was his father, whose plain dress, not differing from that of those whom he served, signified the height of dignity to which he had attained.

It was the perfection of the service that held the admiring attention of the butler's son, the working of the machine, not the company to whose convenience it tended. So a traveler, watching the machines of a ship, might forget that they were carrying him forward.

The women withdrew from the hall with a sweep of silk and velvet and glitter of jewels. The men gathered together at one end of the table. The maids closed the panel in the screen. "Now, then, Willie Page," said one of them, "you run along home to your mother. It's nearly 10 o'clock."

The boy, awakened from his dream, ran all the way home, and panting and a little frightened, opened the door of the kitchen, in which his mother was sitting sewing by the table. She looked up from her work.

"Lor, child," she said quietly, "you didn't ought to run so fast. Sit down and tell me about the company."

He shut the door behind him, sat down on a wooden chair by the place, and broke into vague description. His father's figure loomed up through his tale like that of some epic round whom all ordinary things revolve.

"I should like to be like him, mother," he said.

"You won't be, some day," she replied, "if you mind your back and keep yourself respectable. Only you never will if you take up with Rat-catcher's Joe and such trash as that."

The boy sat silent and looked into the fire.

"You tell me about the company," his mother said.

He began a halting, colorless catalogue, prompted by questions, suddenly interrupted by Mrs. Page bursting out at him:

"I don't know you couldn't take notice better than that you wouldn't have gone. Be off to bed, quick, or I'll take the stick to you. I never seen such a boy. Be off!"

He vanished quickly and silently, and set down to her work again to await her husband's return.

MRS. PAGE had been first housemaid at the castle. Like her husband, she came of a race of servants—sober, responsible, discreet men and women, well dressed, well fed, well housed through generations—a class apart.

She had on a black dress with a lace collar and a large brooch. Her hair was brushed smoothly back from her forehead. The wedding ring on her thin hand caught the light from the lamp as she sewed diligently.

So she sat, sometimes doing the honors to the young ladies from the castle—soft-voiced, respectfully at ease, with plenty to say, but never overstepping the bounds of caste.

Presently her husband came in—with his bald head and portly presence, like a family solicitor.

"Well, wife, I hope you've got something little tasty for supper," he said.

Mrs. Page busied herself between the oven and the table, already laid for a late meal. The savory and the presently produced would have made her ladyship's menu cards blush pink, but the stately butler devalued them with avidity. He had made himself comfortable, changing his evening coat for the old jacket, taking off his collar and tie, and putting on a pair of carpet slippers which had been warming in front of the fire. He finished his supper with a Welsh rarebit and a deep draught of port from a pewter tankard.

"That's better than all your French kickshaws," he said, wiping his mouth. "Did you let Willie go to the gallery?" he asked when he had satisfied his wife's curiosity as to the company he had come from serving.

"That the child?" said Mrs. Page. "He couldn't tell me no more than if he'd never been there at all."

The father laughed.

"I know what Willie kept his eyes for," he said. "I tell you, wife, there's nothing that boy won't rise to. I've done pretty well myself, but I thought a deal more of marbles and birds' nesting at his age than of getting on in service."

Two boys were lying on the rabbit-skin turf of a coombe under the shadow of an outcropping rock. The sky was blue above them, and far below the blue sea murmured.

One of the boys was Willie Page, the other was a ragged urchin whose appearance contrasted strangely with that of the proper, well kept child beside him. He had a dark, handsome face, and it must be confessed, very dirty face, and his tangled hair was dead black. As he lay on the grass, throwing about his lean, muscular limbs, he looked the embodiment of careless, adventurous freedom. He was known in the village, five miles away, as Rat-catcher's Joe.

Willie Page was expatiating on the glories of the banquet the night before.

"And I suppose you'll wear silk stockings and red breeches and have your head filled with four some day."

"Not at first," replied the butler's son, his mind filled with the vision of stately service. "I shall begin as houseboy, and if I behave and am quick and obliging, father says I shall soon rise."

The ragged figure by his side sat up on the grass.

"You'll wear an apron, like a maid, and wash up pots and pans," he said,

in mocking derision. "And you'll always do what somebody else tells you all your life, even when you've got a bald head like your old dad. You're a measly cur, Bill Page, and so is your dad, for all he holds himself so high. I wouldn't lead such a life, not if you were to pay me all the money the lord has got."

The butler's son was stung into a rare self-assertion.

"No one would take you into good service," he said. "Look at your clothes!"

The other boy subsided onto the turf again with a careless laugh.

"Clothes ain't everything," he said, with precocious wisdom. "You've got good clothes enough, but you don't look higher than to be a servant all your life. If you can be a servant to a lord, that's all you look for."

"What do you look to be, then?"

"Me? I'll be a lord myself, or as good as one," replied the ragged child. "I'll have a castle, and all the gold and silver what you've talked about, and great lazy men to hand me my meals. I'll have you, Bill Page, to wait on me, if you're quick and obligin'." If you ain't, I'll sack you. Come on, Bill Page. We'll play at me being a lord and you my servant. Take off my boots!"

They played fantastically for an hour, the little outcast comporting himself with impressive dignity, the respectable servant's child waiting on his whims.

PAGES master stood in front of the fire in his business room, a tall, full-bodied, hearty man.

"Oh, yes, certainly, Page; by all means," he said loudly. "I'll write today."

"I'm very much obliged to you, my lord," said the butler. "It will be a good start for the boy to get into such an establishment."

"Yes, he ought to do well. I suppose you've made it all right with the house steward?"

"Yes, my lord. He is willing to take the boy, but he is not allowed to engage any servant without his grace's approval."

"I see, I see. Well, we'll make that all right. There's nothing against him, is there? Good report from the school, and all that sort of thing, eh?"

The butler was a trifle disturbed.

"Very good, my lord," he said, "except for one thing. His mother and me haven't been able to break him of following the rat-catcher's boy. There's no good hiding it."

This piece of information, somewhat to his surprise, was received with a hearty laugh. The rat-catcher, a family established on a little plot of his own ground on the skirts of his lordship's best covert, had occasioned acute annoyance for many years to that estimable landowner and to the community in general, and his name was not usually greeted with laughter.

"His lordship threw himself into an easy chair."

"You needn't worry about that any more," he said. "I've got rid of that rascal at last. It is what I have been trying to do for the last twenty years."

"Indeed, my lord," said the butler, hoping to hear more.

"Yes, Mr. Carpenter has just been in to tell me about it. I've been able to put that fellow in prison half a dozen times, but I've never been able to get him to sell his holding."

"I suppose your lordship knows that he has married that woman at last?"

"Yes, and she's done the trick. It is she that has made him sell. I take it. She's greedy. I hear she has turned the boy out of doors, too. Is that true?"

"Yes, my lord. He's gone off, nobody knows where. The way the other boys run after him—well, nobody could do anything to stop them."

"Ah! Well, the temptation is removed now. He was a shocking young rascal, as bad as his father, and a good deal cleverer. Very well, Page, I'll write to the duke. I dare say you're right to start him some where else. I hope he'll do you credit."

From London to Ireland, from Ireland to Scotland, from Scotland to the great palace in the Midlands, Willie Page followed the family word, and he served, year after year, steadily rising, and, finally, when he was not much over thirty, reaching the proud position of house steward and the summit of his ambition.

His master died, and he served his successor, still his new master's child, grown up, marry and have children of their own. He knew of all that went on in the family and in the numerous great families with which it was allied, and, indeed, a humble member of it himself, relying upon its doings for variety in his life and desiring none of his own making.

He put by money, year after year. He inherited the savings of his father and mother when they died and put them by, too. But he had at no time any inclination toward matrimony. His position was sufficient for him.

It was June in London, and the great territorial magnate served by William Page had left his country houses and had removed his household to a grim mansion in the heart of the town, all dirty stone and narrow windows without, all luxury and beauty within.

This particular magnate's territorial greatness had been founded some generations back upon finance, and he still exercised some of his attention, so that there occasionally appeared for a day or two at one or another of the country houses or at dinner in London people whom William Page looked upon with mild disapproval. Especially was

the butler's son, or Rat-catcher's Joe?

"It's wonderful!" said William Page. "How did you do it—Mr. Joseph," he added, by way of compromise.

"How did I do it? Why, as I'd always meant to do it. I kept my eyes open for chances, and when they came I was on top of them. I've often gone cold and hungry, Bill Page, and that's more than you've ever done, but I never missed a chance."

"Did you ever think of old times when you were making your money?" asked William Page.

None of those among the horde of his new acquaintances who commented on the correct manners of an admittedly self-made man could have guessed that they were the result of detailed training by his quiet, respectful servant.

"If you will excuse me saying so, sir, it is not the custom to allude to the Earl of Something or the Countess of Something. And the same with any nobleman under the rank of a duke."

"Oh, that's the trick, is it? Really, you ought to write a book, Page."

William Page was busy enough. Coombe's great staff of servants under his experienced supervision was drilled into as efficient a machine as it would be possible to find anywhere.

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But, of course, he can afford it.

He could afford to produce any effect, but he could not actually have produced this one if it had not been for William Page.

He knew that. It was part of the unconscious art he exercised to keep his hold over his one-time playfellow, whom at the bottom of his heart he despised, that he sometimes made it plain that he knew it.

"You've learnt something in your life, Page," he said to him once. "I can always find use for the men who can do one particular thing better than other people. You're worth money to me. Here's twenty pounds for you. Go and waste it, if you've got the pluck."

William Page took the banknote, but he would rather it had not been offered to him. He had taught Coombe many points of good manners, but to avoid hurting people's feelings had not come into his course of tuition.

William Page's situation was one which most servants would have considered the most eminently satisfactory. Money flowed into his pockets from the master himself and the master's guests, and he was rapidly amassing what to a man in his position was a considerable fortune.

The staff under him was so large that he was neither obliged nor expected to do anything but supervise, and he had absolute authority over every servant in the household.

And yet, in spite of his material welfare, he felt himself degraded, undervalued. He had lived all his life of honorable service among those of high and assured position. He had been in the reflection of their greatness and had felt more conscious pride in his master's brightness than in his own.

He would have been happier in the house of a poor man related to half the peerage than at the head of a great establishment owned by an admitted but usurping leader of fashion.

It was not, after all, the great occasions on which the house was filled with guests of name and place that gave him the aroma of exclusiveness for which his soul thirsted—those he had in his new situation as well as his old. It was the privacy of social greatness that he missed, the every-

day life of the same warp and woof as the hours of ceremony, when great people lived naturally, but were great people still, and all their intimates were great people.

In Coombe's establishment, if the house was not filled with men and women of the smart world, living noisily and extravagantly, it was invaded by loud-voiced men who took no pleasure in sport and held as nothing the beauties that surrounded them.

"I'm going to New York on Friday," Page. You will come with me. Pack plenty of clothes."

It was five years since William Page had taken service with his new master. He was little over sixty, but he was white-haired and thin—an old man now. The millionaire was as strong and upright as ever. William Page was his body servant, now as well as the head of his household, and performed tasks for him which he would not have thought of performing for anybody five years before. The one-time vagabond needed as much personal service as any young beauty of the aristocratic world.

"America, sir!" he faltered. "But there's the dinner on Friday, and the ball."

"I've put them off. Don't talk. Do as you're told."

He spoke brutally, with a frown of his bushy eyebrows. He was dressing for the evening in a great room with an elaborate empire bed, soft carpet, silken curtains and a dressing table crowded with water and cut glass. William Page was preparing to kneel down and tie his shoe laces.

As he did so he tried to summon up courage to refuse any longer to condescend in the service of a man who had treated him ill. But the words would not come. He dreaded the explosion of wrath that would follow.

Coombe stood up before the glass and tied his tie carefully.

"I've had enough of it," he said. "It's too easy. There will be somebody to fight over there."

"Are you intending to stay there, sir?"

"What's that to you? Do what you're told, and don't ask questions."

William Page did not go to America after all. Coombe took one of the footmen.

Page had six months of peace. He went down to the village where he had been born. He was treated with great respect. His father's master was dead and his son reigned in his stead—a middle-aged man, whom William Page had known and played with as a child.

"I wish you would come back here to me, William," he said.

Here was the old man's chance. He might have gained his freedom by writing. He did not take the chance.

When Coombe returned from America it was to immerse himself once more in great financial undertakings. He had grown tired of spending his money and took a fierce delight in increasing it. He lived mostly in London, and worked as hard in the city as a poor clerk.

He sold his country house. When he wanted a holiday he went to Paris or the south of France. One autumn he took a moor in Scotland. He went to America six times in five years.

The luxury which he had surrounded himself had become necessary to him, but he developed no coarse luxury of eating and drinking, and worse.

Once, after an evening of revelry, William Page summoned up courage to give notice. Coombe spoke to him kindly.

"You were always straight-laced, Bill Page," he said with a rather shame-faced smile. "But you won't desert a friend after all these years."

THE OTHER LAUGHED HIS GREAT LAUGH. "Many a time," he said. "You know what I call myself. I hadn't a name of my own. And I thought of you, Bill Page, and laughed many a time at my thoughts. And now I'll tell you what. I went on, with an access of determination. 'I've made my pile in America, but I'm going to settle down and spend my money in the old country. I'm going to be a big wig myself, as I always told you I should; and you shall be my servant, Bill Page, at double your wages, and help me.'"

What was there about the man that made William Page accept his offer as a command and without a thought of hesitation prepare to leave the service in which he had spent forty years of his life, and in which he had expected to end his days? Not the offer of double wages, which he afterward refused.

"A month's notice!" exclaimed the duke.

He was sitting at a big French writing table in a room looking out to the quiet garden of his London house, and turned round in amazement to face his steward standing respectfully before him.

William Page told him he was going to take service with Mr. Coombe.

"Mr. Coombe! What on earth for? You've been with me and my father for forty years, Page," he said. "I think you have always been treated well. What on earth do you want to leave for? Do you want higher wages? Is that it?"

No, that was not it. He spoke of gratitude. He was quite evidently distressed; but as evidently determined. He did not disclose his early acquaintance with Coombe, that had been stipulated. And he gave no other reason for his decision; there was no other to give.

"Oh, very well," said his grace impatiently at last. "You must do as you like. But I consider that in leaving me without giving me any reason after all these years you are guilty of great ingratitude. I don't understand it."

The accusation of ingratitude cut William Page to the heart. He had a real affection for his master, and he left the service in which he had lived in contentment for so many years with a heavy heart.

COOMBE BOUGHT BUCKLEY COURT, the largest property then for sale within two hours' rail of London. It was a glorious house, as big as a college, full of treasures. It had enormous elms and round the gardens stretched a noble park of beech and oak and ferny glades and hollows.

He had the sense, under expert advice, to leave his country house as it was, but the big London house which he bought at the same time he had redecorated and refurnished from top to bottom, also under expert advice.

He was a great deal talked about, as a man who is lavish in spending money after all these years of the amusement of his fellows is apt to be,

and since his ambition for the time being was to cut a figure in the world of wealth and fashion, he may be said to have gratified it fully.

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